



## PRESS RELEASE

# Two RT Employees Indicted for Covertly Funding and Directing U.S. Company that Published Thousands of Videos in Furtherance of Russian Interests

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For Immediate Release

Office of Public Affairs

**Employees of Russian State-Controlled Media Outlet Deployed Nearly \$10 Million to Publish RT-Curated Content, Which Garnered Millions of Views, Through a Tennessee-Based Online Content Creation Company**

**Note:** [View the indictment here.](#)

An indictment charging Russian nationals Kostiantyn Kalashnikov, 31, also known as Kostya, and Elena Afanasyeva, 27, also known as Lena, with conspiracy to violate the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and conspiracy to commit money laundering was unsealed today in the Southern District of New York. Kalashnikov and Afanasyeva are at large.

“The Justice Department has charged two employees of RT, a Russian state-controlled media outlet, in a \$10 million scheme to create and distribute content to U.S. audiences with hidden Russian government messaging,” said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. “The Justice Department will not tolerate attempts by an authoritarian regime to exploit our country’s free exchange of ideas in order to covertly further its own propaganda efforts, and our investigation into this matter remains ongoing.”

“Our approach to combating foreign malign influence is actor-driven, exposing the hidden hand of adversaries pulling strings of influence from behind the curtain,” said Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco. “As alleged in today’s indictment, Russian state broadcaster RT and its employees, including the charged defendants, co-opted online commentators by funneling them nearly \$10 million to pump pro-Russia propaganda and disinformation across social media to U.S. audiences. The Department will not tolerate foreign efforts to illegally manipulate American public opinion by sowing discord and division.”

“Covert attempts to sow division and trick Americans into unwittingly consuming foreign propaganda represents attacks on our democracy,” said FBI Director Christopher A. Wray. “Today’s actions show that as long as foreign adversaries like Russia keep engaging in hostile influence campaigns, they are going to keep running into the FBI. We will continue to do everything we can to expose the hidden hand of foreign adversaries like Russia and disrupt their efforts to meddle in our free and open society.”

“The Russian government has long sought to sow discord and chaos in the United States through propaganda and foreign malign influence campaigns,” said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “As alleged, the covert operations by RT employees exploited our free and open press and targeted millions of Americans as unwitting victims of Russia’s psychological warfare.”

“As alleged, the Russian state broadcaster RT orchestrated a massive scheme to influence the American public by secretly planting and financing a content creation company on U.S. soil,” said U.S. Attorney Damian Williams for the Southern District of New York. “The instruments of the scheme were RT employees Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva, who managed the operation from Moscow using fake personas and shell companies, and the victims of the scheme were the American people, who received Russian messaging without knowing it. As the charges unsealed today demonstrate, this Office will work with our law enforcement partners to unmask and hold accountable all those who

conduct malign influence campaigns in the United States, no matter how hard they try to hide their tracks.”

According to the court documents, RT, formerly known as Russia Today, is a state-controlled media outlet funded and directed by the Government of Russia. Over at least the past year, RT and its employees, including Kalashnikov and Afanasyeva, deployed nearly \$10 million to covertly finance and direct a Tennessee-based online content creation company (U.S. Company-1). In turn, U.S. Company-1 published English-language videos on multiple social media channels, including TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube. Since publicly launching in or about November 2023, U.S. Company-1 has posted nearly 2,000 videos that have garnered more than 16 million views on YouTube alone. Many of the videos posted by U.S. Company-1 contain commentary on events and issues in the U.S., such as immigration, inflation, and other topics related to domestic and foreign policy. While the views expressed in the videos are not uniform, most are directed to the publicly stated goals of the Government of Russia and RT — to amplify domestic divisions in the United States.

In order to carry out RT’s secret influence campaign in the United States, Kalashnikov and Afanasyeva operated under covert identities at U.S. Company-1. Posing as an outside editor, Kalashnikov edited U.S. Company-1 content, monitored U.S. Company-1’s funding and hiring, and introduced Afanasyeva as a member of his purported editing team. Using the fake personas Helena Shudra and Victoria Pesti, Afanasyeva posted and directed the posting by U.S. Company-1 of hundreds of videos. Afanasyeva also collected information from and gave instructions to U.S. Company-1 staff. For example, after the March 22, 2024, terrorist attack on a music venue in Moscow, Afanasyeva asked one of U.S. Company-1’s founders to blame Ukraine and the United States for the attack, writing: “I think we can focus on the Ukraine/U.S. angle. . . . [T]he mainstream media spread fake news that ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack yet ISIS itself never made such statements. All terrorists are now detained while they were heading to the border with Ukraine which makes it even more suspicious why they would want to go to Ukraine to hide.”

Between in or about October 2023 and in or about August 2024, RT sent wire transfers to U.S. Company-1 totaling approximately \$9.7 million, which represented nearly 90% of U.S. Company-1’s bank deposits from all sources combined. The wires were sent from shell companies in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Mauritius, and were often accompanied by wire notes ascribing the payments to the purchase of electronics. For example, the wire note for a \$318,800 wire payment from a shell entity in Turkey to U.S. Company-1 on March 1, read: “BUYING GOODS-INV.013-IPHONE 15 PRO MAX 512GB.”

U.S. Company-1 never disclosed to its viewers that it was funded and directed by RT. Nor did U.S. Company-1 or its two founders register with the Attorney General as an agent of a foreign principal.

Kalashnikov and Afanasyeva both of Russia, are charged with conspiracy to violate FARA, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, and conspiracy to commit money laundering, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. If convicted, a federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The FBI is investigating the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Alexander Li and Juliana Murray for the Southern District of New York and Trial Attorney Brett Reynolds of the Justice Department’s National Security Division Counterintelligence and Export Control Section are prosecuting the case.

*An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.*

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Topic

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